

wild cherry, apple blossom by thestrangestthing (dishrag)

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Summary:

The sun glowed behind Billy's hair like a halo, softening him immeasurably. And in this moment there was no reason to hang on the past. Sure Billy had tried before, with that grunt after basketball practice and Dustin telling him that Billy had apologised to Lucas. But now after every thing, after school was slowing down, his college applications were all in limbo, he was alone. It was better to salvage a bridge than pour gasoline on the smoking remains.

or what went down on of the Fourth of July 1985 in Hawkins, Indiana

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Okay so this is from the word prompts on tumblr: Barbecues, Graduation, Lemonade, Parade & Power outage.

the announcement of S3 being set in the summer had got me all excited and completely fucked up.

Steve was warm through and through. The darkness inside himself and in Hawkins had left when the leaves began to grow back and the daffodils peaked their yellow heads from the once frozen ground. The spring had brought heavy rains that cleared the air and fed the grass above the filled in tunnels. It brought a sun high enough in the sky that the shadows were short and manageable. They weren't like the long shadows of winter that caused Steve to constantly make a double take. The ominous black formation in the corner of his eye hadn't appeared in a while.

Summer came quickly and without warning, but spring did not succumb gracefully, heavy April showers plaguing May whilst July heat hung in the air. Sometimes, Steve swore that he heard the ground hiss with steam when the first droplets hit. Summer brought intense, thick heat that coddled the entire town. Steve wondered if the air was actually thicker. On particularly hot days it felt like breathing in molasses. This period was sprawling, with days that were long and nights that were longer. However being alone in the sun was infinitely better than being alone in the darkness.

Steve would occasionally walk in the cemetery at dawn, the low sun casting familiar, yet strange, long shadows from the tombstones. It's where he would go when he couldn't sleep. He'd visit Barb's grave by

the old apple blossom tree and would sit down on the ground, cradled by fallen flowers. He'd always feel responsible for her death and guilty for not visiting her grave sooner.

Sometimes, Billy Hargrove would be there. Steve didn't know why. At first it was concerning. Billy had this caustic presence that threatened to ruin Steve's sombre tranquillity. However, Billy would just wander quietly and alone through the graveyard and speed away before Steve could say anything.

Their quiet pattern continued. Steve wanted to say Billy had changed, but that wasn't true. He was just as brash and as obnoxious as always at school. He'd swagger down the hallways and have girls swooning around him. He'd smile at them like an animal baring its teeth. He didn't really pay much attention to Steve anymore. It was the end of the school year and Billy had the crown. He'd still knock Steve whilst playing basketball, his large sweaty chest colliding with Steve a like a freight train,, but he'd help him back up.

One day after practise, about a month before school was due to cut out, Billy apologised to Steve in the showers. If a couple of their other teammates hadn't been around, Steve might have been sure it was genuine. Instead, he'd rolled his eyes and left. He always wondered why Billy just didn't come up to him in the graveyard and apologize then. It might have been weirder, but at least Tommy H wasn't there.

One day, Steve was sat in his car in the graveyard, window down,absent-mindedly picking at a wild cherry Danish his mom made and left for him. The Beach Boys bled out of the car stereo whilst the final pinky hues dissipated from the sky. Suddenly, a large hand passed through the gap in the window and grabbed his breakfast.

Billy stood by the door of Steve's BMW, one hand on his hip and the other holding tightly to the danish. His open white shirt billowed in the slight breeze. Steve hoped that it would collide into the deep red of the cherry jam.

Billy looked Steve dead in the eyes and took a large bite from the home-made pastry.

“What the fuck, dude?” Steve stuttered, stunned. He scrambled to try and get the pastry back from Billy’s clutches. His efforts were in vain as Billy took another bite.

Billy shrugged. “I missed breakfast.”

Steve got out of his car and snatched the pastry back, rolling his eyes. He couldn’t ever imagine Billy eating anything other than a steak so rare blood dripped down the fork as he lifted it to his mouth. Or trash, straight out of the trashcan like a raccoon goblin hybrid. He was pretty high when he thought of that one.

“Asshole,” Steve muttered, popping the rest of the danish in his mouth.

Billy brushed his hands off on his jeans and stuck out his hand.

“Truce,” he said with conviction, more conviction than he’d ever managed before with Steve.

The sun glowed behind Billy's hair like a halo, softening him immeasurably, and in this moment there was no reason to hang on the past. Sure, Billy had *tried* before, with that grunt after basketball practice and Dustin telling him that Billy had apologised to Lucas. But now, after every thing, after school was slowing down, his college applications were all in limbo, he was alone. It was better to salvage a bridge than pour gasoline on the smoking remains.

“Fine,” Steve sighed, clasping Billy’s hand in a firm handshake.

In the graveyard, before the cicadas started singing and before the sun barely had time to rise, was an contextless void that existed outside the past and the present. It was easy like this, warm air and peach skies. A graveyard seemed like an ironic place to start a new friendship.

It was the 4th of July in Hawkins, Indiana, and plumes of smoke billowed from the barbeque in Steve Harrington’s backyard. It was a Wednesday, a little after Billy and Steve’s graduation. They watched Jonathan carefully flip over burgers on the cramped grill, everyone had been too hungry and impatient to be on the second round of burgers, everyone gave terrible reasons why they couldn’t possibly wait. The thick summer air hung at head height, making everyone relaxed and lazy. It swathed Steve as he lay sunbathing on one of the beds, with Billy on his left and a pile of towels on his right.

Steve knew that Billy loved the heat, he was like a cat laying in a pool of light, sleepy and docile. He lay outstretched next to Steve, the sun filling the peaks and troughs of his abs with light. He was born in sunlight. Steve imagined him like this in California, golden through and through, wearing tight red shorts and sunglasses that screamed douchebag (although Steve would never tell him that). He often

wondered if he and Max brought the weather with them, or if Hawkins was just overcompensating for the winter they'd all endured.

Billy turned over and slapped Steve's exposed chest, hard. Steve yelped and sat up quickly, like he'd been hit in the chest with a lawn dart. He gripped the stinging hand print, stringing a collection of profanities from a few different languages. Somewhere, Steve's Italian and French teachers were rolling in their proverbial graves.

"You're burning," Billy muttered, letting his glasses slip to the bridge of his nose.

Steve rubbed his chest. "So? why did you slap me?!".

"Handprint thing, isn't it? If it leaves a mark or something it means you're burnt." Billy shrugged, whilst pulling out a cigarette and popping it between his lips.

"Pretty sure that's bullshit, dude," Steve hissed, like the searing skin on his chest.

Billy leant over and pulled his glasses off his face, holding them in front of Steve to let him check out the welt on his chest in the reflection of the glasses. Steve could see the air of caution in Billy's eyes, almost worried that he'd actually hurt his new friend.

"See it's fine." Billy coughed nonchalantly, slouching back into the sun lounger. He lit his cigarette and popped the glasses back on his

face.

Steve huffed and poked the redness on his chest. Perhaps he was a little burnt. He'd stupidly decided to go toe to toe with Billy on the sunbathing front, despite not having seeing sun this strong since the day after his 4th birthday.

"You still slapped me," Steve grumbled, clambering from the sun bed to get some more sunscreen from inside.

"I'll slap you again if you keep being a whiney piss baby, Harrington," Billy mumbled, clearly at least a half of the way there to dozing.

Steve wandered inside. The dark house was darker than usual, his eyes took a while to get used to the change in brightness. He stumbled through the lounge, clumsily fumbling for the sunscreen. Billy was an ass, but he'd reminded him on multiple occasions that he should be careful in the sun, especially because he had so many moles.

Everyone other than Will and Steve were still cautious of Billy's presence, dampening their voices when they got close to him, afraid he was like a lion ready to be spooked by any loud noise. He'd been constantly hanging around Steve lately, much to everyone else's confusion, and after a string of apologies and a candy based bribe from Dustin, Billy started to hang around the party too.

Billy was the attack dog of the group. Once he warded off the bullies that would pick on Will on his way from school to Jonathan's car. Just the appearance of the muscled up, denim clad 18 year old was enough to send any middle school bully running.

Sometimes, Billy would come to the Byers' house to trade some records with Jonathan. Apparently Jonathan was easily swayed by the sudden availability to a guy with Led Zeppelin's entire back catalogue.

Billy would sit at the kitchen table, nursing a small glass of lemonade whilst he waited for Jonathan. He'd look around the small house uneasily, averting his gaze from the nail holes in the wooden floor. It was a subtle aversion. He'd let his eyes wander so dangerously close, almost daring himself to look, to remember and try and piece together what happened that night.

Will stood in the doorway, quietly observing him before getting the courage to go up and talk to him. Billy's head snapped away from the floor. He smiled up at Will, kindly, his eyes of china blue something safe. Will never really saw Billy at his full crazy, he didn't really see him the same way the rest of the party did. Billy's face went soft when he talked to Steve sometimes, too, so he obviously wasn't all asshole. There was a sort of mutual understanding between them as Billy's face broadened into an open smile.

Will padded over to the table and placed his hand on the surface lightly, his voice was quiet and shaky, his large brown eyes quivering. "Th... Thanks for helping me out".

"Don't mention it, little guy." Billy smiled a small, genuine smile and sipped the glass of lemonade.

Will smiled bashfully, shook his head and perched on the chair opposite Billy.

"Do they pick on you often?" Billy asked, finishing the last drops of lemonade in the glass.

"Sometimes." Will mumbled like it was no big deal at all, but Billy knew that it was. "They call me Zombie boy and fag..."

That last word seared Billy's ears as it left Will's lips. He'd heard it too many times from his father's lips too.

He interrupted Will before he could say anything else that made his blood curdle in his arteries, "Well if you ever need any help at all, just give me a call. I'll frighten them so bad that they'll never pick on anyone like you again."

Billy wanted to say that he'd floss his teeth with their tendons, but he knew that Will had been through some shit. He didn't want to add that vision to whatever else the poor kid had seen.

"Why are you being so kind? Because, *no offence*, everyone said you were an asshole," Will said, almost whispering the word asshole, as he didn't quite believe that Billy was that.

"They're not wrong," Billy corrected him and drummed his fingers on the old kitchen table. Will watched his fingers go.

"You helped me and you didn't have to, no girls or were around to impress, or Steve..." His eyes were suddenly with Billy to take the compliment.

Billy interrupted Will. "I see a lot of myself in you kid, deep down. Just with a load of extra shitty stuff on top too." Billy sighed heavily and a heavy pause hung between them.

Will fumbled with something in his hands and handed over a tape to Billy, his hand shaking and his eyes glowing. "I made this for you, they're from the records you let Jonathan borrow."

Billy accepted the gift gracefully and carefully flipped the tape over in his hand. He eyed the tape and the scrawled 'Billy' on the B side, keeping his expression as neutral as he could.

"Thanks, man." He smiled and ruffled Will's hair.

Jonathan appeared in the kitchen with a very battered looking copy of Houses of The Holy between both hands. "Billy, uh it was just the Led Zeppelin one right?"

"Yeah." Billy stood up and quickly shoved the tape into the back pocket of his jeans, took the record from Jonathan and slid it up underneath his arm.

"I'll see you at Steve's on Wednesday?" Jonathan scrambled to follow Billy to the front door.

"Yeah, see ya." Billy swung the door open, the handle collided with

the wall. Jonathan wanted to tell him to be careful, but he wasn't sure if Billy would beat his ass like he did to Steve in the very same room. Plus, he knew his mom wouldn't notice another ding in the wall.

Will chased after Jonathan, the floor creaking as he barrelled towards the door. "Bye, Billy!" he sang brightly, his soulful brown eyes twinkling with anticipation.

"See you, Will." Billy pivoted slightly as he exited the Byers household and gave Will a small two fingered salute.

Will waved at Billy happily. Jonathan glanced at his little brother and his now sudden apparent enthusiasm for Billy Hargrove. He parted a confused glance at Will, who was peering at the back of Billy Hargrove with the kind of adoration he hadn't seen from Will in a long time.

Jonathan wandered over to Steve, who was busy lathering his chest in SPF 50 and carefully trying not to drop any on the kitchen tiles. He cursed profusely when he didn't manage to contain the drips.

"Steve, I gotta talk to you." Jonathan rubbed the back of his neck, obviously apprehensive about the impending conversation.

Steve didn't respond, focused on catching the areas of his chest that stung the most. Jonathan almost said that he should put a shirt on or something, but if the rest of the summer was anything to go by he *was not going to do that* . Steve had been perpetually half-naked this entire summer, and it was clear by the amount him and Billy worked out in his garage he wasn't planning on covering up soon.

“I need you to talk to Billy for me.”

Steve paused and removed his hands from his now glistening torso. He winced pre-emptively. He didn't want to know what a ' *we need to talk* ' conversation would look like with Billy Hargrove. “Can't you do it?”

“Not for *this*, ” Jonathan stated, averting his eyes from Steve's bashfully.

“Why not?”

“He's still absolutely *terrifying* , Steve” Jonathan retorted ,and he wasn't wrong. Steve looked back at him and gave him a ' *fair enough* ' look.

“Okay, what is it?” Steve sighed, placing his hands on his hips, tapping his fingers as Jonathan paused.

The stereo went quiet between tracks.

“Thank god that's over,” Jonathan chuckled, stalling

“This is my house and *No Jacket Required* is always required,” Steve announced, proud of his terrible, terrible pun. He had been ready to lay his life on the line for Phil Collins the day he first listened to that album. Billy and Jonathan had been less enthusiastic about it, especially after Steve told them to just *get over* Genesis.

Jonathan inhaled sharply and rolled his eyes. This wasn't the time to get into that argument with Steve, especially considering what he was about to ask him.

They both paused as the opening bars of ' *Take Me Home*' came alive, both remembering what they were supposed to be talking about.

“It's Will,” Jonathan sighed, breaking the silence.

“I thought Will loved Billy?” Steve stated, confused.

“Yeah, I think he likes Billy *a lot*, ” Jonathan peered at the taller boy. He could almost visibly see the cogs turn in Steve's head as he pieced the whole situation together.

“What's the problem, then?” Steve began, holding his hands up pointedly, still confused. “ *Oh*. ” He paused and lowered his hands.

"I really don't want him to... go full Billy on Will," Jonathan mumbled, "and he likes you and you have a way with words that I just don't have." Jonathan knew that the way to get to Steve was either through his stomach or through his ego. "Remember that incident at the movie theatre last weekend?"

Steve chuckled and nodded. It was probably not a good idea for Jonathan to approach Billy about his little brother having a crush on him. He'd probably end up with a busted nose or three less teeth. At least Billy liked Steve rather than how he just tolerated Jonathan for access to his record collection and cooking skills.

"Please, Steve, just talk to him and I'll talk to Will." Jonathan's voice firmed as he pressed Steve.

Steve rolled his eyes and scoffed, his exasperated hand gestures making an appearance again.

"Fine."

Jonathan eyed Steve as he sat back down next to Billy and handed him one of the beers he had his long fingers laced around. Steve smiled at Billy as he thanked him for the beer and ran his fingers through his chestnut hair nervously. Billy lifted his hand to his blonde curls that had been exaggerated by the sweat and salt on his skin, seemingly mirroring Steve's nerves.

Will approached the BBQ and Jonathan handed him a burger adorned

with fried onions and cheese. Will thanked Jonathan in a quick mumble as he squirted ketchup on the burger and his hand

Jonathan grabbed Will's wrist before he could get back to watch Mike and Dustin argue about something. "Hey hey wait," Jonathan said. Will peered up at him with a mouth full of bread and meat. "So you and Billy seem to get along well."

Will gulped his mouthful and looked at Jonathan nervously. He'd never explicitly told anyone about the way he felt about other boys, but if anyone was to know it would be Jonathan.

"Yeah, he's a good guy, he helped me out," Will muttered, trying to play off that the only thing he felt towards Billy was thanks for helping him ward off bullies and that mixtape was a ' *thanks for making sure I didn't get my ass kicked* ' mixtape.

"I mean, you seem to like him a lot," Jonathan pressed, giving him those ' *I know* ' eyes that Will recognised so well.

Jonathan sighed. "I've seen the way you look at him, Will"

" *Oh?* " Will questioned. He knew exactly what Jonathan was getting at, but he wanted to prolong the inevitable, just for a little while longer.

Jonathan said again, firmly but fondly, "I've seen the way you look at him." He paused, trying to think of the best way to put it. "Billy can

be dangerous, he's not the most open minded..."

"He knows I'm..." The look Will gave Jonathan meant he didn't have to finish that sentence. He was 13 and definitely not ready to finish it. "He's fine with it... well not fine..." Will paused as he fought to find the correct words. "He understands, actually."

"Really?" Jonathan quizzed, flipping a burger nonchalantly trying to desperately disguise his absolute surprise at that thought.

Will nodded proudly. Will knew he knew something about the big bad Billy Hargrove that made him a little bit softer and a little bit more like Will, and Will wanted everyone else to see Billy the way he saw him.

"I'm surprised. He was okay with the whole *queer* thing?" Jonathan mouthed the Q word as not to alarm Will, just in case he'd gravely misjudged this entire situation.

Will peered up at him confused, his brows knitted together as he took another large bite from his burger.

"Why wouldn't he be?" He asked after swallowing the bite.

Jonathan was more confused than ever. Billy was a predictable person. A jock asshole with a car that was probably compensating for something. The only thing out of character about him was him apologising to Steve and the rest of the party. He was still an asshole

after that and would still be in six months time.

“What? Is Billy gay too or something?” Jonathan stabbed in the dark, laughing at the absurdity of it all.

Will's eyes widened with panic and surprise. He hadn't seen that look on Will's face since last Halloween. “You *can't*. ”

Jonathan felt his own expression mimic Will's.

“You can't say anything to anyone!” Will stuttered frantically, “*especially Steve.* ”

He knew how terrified Will was, just by the way his skin turned white and then red with embarrassment. Jonathan didn't understand that last part, however. He didn't know Steve all that well, but he knew Nancy would have never been with someone was a bigot.

“I won't, of course I won't,” He said softly, placing a reassuring hand on Will's forearm. “It's all fine, I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

Will smiled up at him, weakly but genuinely, and shook Jonathan's grip from his arm. “I'm fine, please don't worry.”

“How do you know?” Jonathan yelled as Will skittered away from his questioning.

“I just do!” Will yelled back from across the yard.

Jonathan secretly wanted to ask who else he ' *just knows about* ' too, but instead he looked over at Billy who was probably talking to Steve about this exact situation. Billy didn't look any different to Jonathan, he was still terrifying, dripping with golden tan and jewellery regardless of his sexuality. Steve looked at Billy, his eyebrows furrowed whilst Billy shrugged. There was no screaming or Billy's fist colliding with Steve's face so hard that it knocked the moles that adorned it clean off.

Steve settled down back on the sunbed, wiped his sunscreen covered hands on Billy's arm, and flipped his Raybans back over his eyes as he flipped Billy the middle finger.

Jonathan could make out the word 'Jackass' from Billy's lips as he watched him gaze at Steve. There was no malice in his face as he uttered the word and carefully wiped the sunscreen on a towel, only what could be described as complete and utter fondness there for the most minute of seconds. It was a blink and you'd miss it type scenario, but then come to think of it there had been so many of those incidents before, small and powerful and seemingly meaningless without the context Will had just given him. But then, Jonathan didn't know how he hadn't noticed it before too, the softness in Billy's shoulders, the lightness in every insult, the warm look in his eyes when he looked at Steve. He didn't know how he missed it. He saw that same look from Will, that's what started this whole thing.

“Harrington! I can't believe you didn't invite me to your sad little 4th

July party!” Tommy H stumbled into Steve’s eyeline, clearly pissed, in more ways than one way.

“Fuck off, Tommy.” Billy sprang from his sun lounge before Steve could get a word in.

“Is Hargrove your bitch now, Harrington?” Tommy slurred, swaying his way into the backyard “How the turn.. Tables turn.”

“Seriously, get your drunk ass off my property,” Steve barked, standing up next to Billy.

“Nope,” Tommy hollered as he encroached on the pack of 13 year olds who looked nervously between each other and then at Steve.

Billy glanced at Steve and then back at Tommy, his fists balled so tight, his knuckles were white.

2. Chapter 2

Summary for the Chapter:

Billy drags Steve on a reluctant road trip.

“Seems like Harrington has you by the balls,” Tommy slurred. He tweaked his jaw as it pulsed with pain and then Tommy laughed like Tommy laughs, eager and with a heavy snort, but this time it’s accompanied by a deep hawking sound as he cleared the blood and bile from his throat.

Billy looked at Tommy’s face, which was reddening by the second as Billy held him tightly around his throat.

Blood framed Tommy’s square teeth and dripped onto his lower lip. In his inebriated state, he licked them slow and sloppily.

“Hargrove, you better be careful what you do next,” Tommy said. The vowels were slurred and elongated. “I’ve heard something that your new boyfriend, *Steve*, might be interested in hearing about.” Tommy’s eyes began to squint shut, as if the alcohol was slowly turning them into lead, and bared his teeth like he’d seen Billy do thousands of times.

Something inside Billy snapped like a heavy duty cable, breaking at such high velocity that it’d sever an unluckily passer by in two. He thrust his forehead into Tommy’s face. The crack from Tommy’s nose was audible throughout the yard. Blood began pouring from his nose uncontrollably, dripping down onto Billy’s bare feet. Dustin and Lucas gaped at Tommy’s streaming nose, whispering ‘gnarly’ to one another. Mike shielded his eyes whilst Max called him a baby. Will and El both stared wide-eyed at Billy.

“Stay away,” Billy snarled as Tommy took a step back, almost tripping over the cooler.

Billy could feel the adrenaline bubble through his veins like boiling tar. Everything was spinning and his head throbbed. The smell of iron collected in his nose after the impact with Tommy’s face. He wasn’t sure who’s blood he was smelling, Tommy’s, his own, or a gross amalgam of the two.

Through the hazed blur he could see the image of the dark haired freckled boy scuttling away, blood seeping out of every facial orifice like on the VHS cover of a B-movie horror flick. He felt the pain ricochet through his head like a bullet caught in a shipping container.

Suddenly, he was met by two hands on his shoulders, grounding him again.

“Billy, what the *fuck* was that for?” Steve never called him Billy. Steve looked him dead in the eyes, but Billy found his eyes circling around Steve’s, which were looking increasingly concerned. “Shit, dude, are you okay?”

Billy finally looked him right in the eyes.

“Who are you?”

Steve's face quickly became plagued with concern as he looked at the open wound on Billy's forehead. Billy blinked slowly and Steve grabbed a loose t-shirt from the huddle of thirteen year olds and held it to Billy's forehead.

"Hey!" Dustin moaned and half heartedly tried to grab the hem of the t-shirt from his sitting position.

"Billy will buy you a new one."

Billy looked around confused and glanced at the concern on Steve's face. "Seriously, I don't recognise this place. Are we not in California anymore?"

Steve couldn't help but gape at Billy. Steve wasn't sure if he was more concerned about Billy's memory, or Billy regaining his memory and realising he now had a scar on his forehead because of Steve. The latter was definitely more terrifying. He instinctively placed his other hand on back of Billy's neck in order to apply more pressure to the wound. Billy winced and inhaled audibly.

"Shit. Fuck. *Shit.* "

Suddenly, Billy's face twisted into a smirk and finally into a familiar, large grin.

"Fuck you!" Steve shoved the bloody t-shirt into Billy's face and angrily darted inside. However, it was hard to make too much of

dramatic exit with the sound of his flip-flops squeaking on the tiled kitchen floor.

“I had you fooled,” Billy announced with a chuckle, following Steve into the kitchen. The coldness on his bare feet almost made him jump.

“Fuck off,” Steve groaned whilst fishing another beer out of the fridge.

“Aw, come on, Harrington,” Billy leaned on the kitchen island, “Gotta admit that it was a bit funny.”

“Funny?!” Steve barked with about as much energy Billy had ever seen him muster. The word flew through the room like a sonic boom before peetering to a stop at Billy’s feet.

“Yeah,” Billy uttered, almost instinctively.

Steve rolled his eyes whilst cracking the seal on the beer.

“If anything comes of this,” Billy hesitantly touched the cut on his forehead, “it’ll be personality changes or something, not memory loss.”

“You’re still an asshole, so you must be fine then.” Steve returned to rifling through a fridge that looked like it had been pilfered by a

large family of fat raccoons, turning over half empty jars of pickles and bottles of condiments that were discontinued in the late seventies.

Billy half heartedly scowled at Steve. With his dark stern eyes and forehead wrinkled like a particularly fat caterpillar, he looked no more genuinely angry than a small child denied a cookie, knowing full well they'd sneak one out of the jar anyway.

"I think I might need stitches though, for real." Billy sighed in defeat, waiting for the fat wrinkles between Steve's eyes to dissipate and be replaced by the ones on his forehead that would appear when the dark haired boy would worry.

"Sewing kits upstairs." Steve licked the beer foam from the top of his can that was threatening to make it's way down the sides. "If you ask her nicely, Nancy'll do it."

"Let Wheeler come at my face with a sharp object after I just headbutted someone in front of her little brother? No way, Jose." Billy chuckled. Of all the people to be scared of in Hawkins, his dad was one and Nancy Wheeler was the other.

"There's a clinic a couple of hours out of town that's open on holidays, there was an incident like six christmases ago that I needed stitches for and it was the only place open." Steve leant against the counter, the suncream on his torso making the contact with the varnished stone thoroughly unpleasant.

"Okay," Billy beamed at Steve, "Thanks"

“Right, see you later.” Steve unstuck himself from the counter and started to make his way back out to the back yard. “If you leave now you might get back in time to see the fireworks the country club set off every year.”

“Ho no, no, no!” Billy grabbed Steve’s bicep hard and fast, almost causing Steve to spill the beer again. “You’re coming with me.”

“Nope, I’m not.” Steve unfurled Billy’s grip with his spare hand.

Billy stood agape for a moment, thinking for the next thing to say. “What if I’m concussed and I fall asleep at the wheel and die, could you forgive yourself for that?”

Steve shrugged, “Yeah, probably.”

This time the grip on Steve’s arm wasn’t so pliable. Steve glared at Billy with those dark eyes again. If this was any other boy, Steve would be surprised by the aggressiveness of the movement.

“Tommy was coming to beat your ass, not mine. You owe me.” Billy’s tone was harsh and unpleasant, like the sound of a fork passing through a garbage disposal unit.

“You didn’t have to headbutt him! He was so wasted a light nudge would have done the trick.” Steve yanked away hard, spilling the

beer in his left hand. "I don't owe you shit." The way the final words came out in a venomous hiss that told Billy that he'd really fucked up. He wasn't sure how, or when he fucked up, but he knew he gone and done it. He didn't know if it was the cracking of teenage skull, the slapping of Steve's sunburnt chest or the pretend amnesia. Steve was thoroughly *pissed* .

It seemed like Billy's self control was up for the day and Billy snapped up Steve's keys and jangled them behind Steve's head.

"Incase I do crash and die, I don't want it to be in my car."

Steve swirled on his heels, slammed his beer can on the marble countertop and pounded towards Billy.

"Not a chance!" Steve snarled and tried to snap the keys out of Billy's hand. He grabbed at Billy's newly formed fist, chests pressed together. Billy grinned at Steve, their noses almost touching. Steve could feel his sunscreen stick to Billy's sweat. Billy pulled himself away from the heat of Steve's body.

Billy licked his lips in the way Billy did, cocky and two steps ahead. Billy inhaled slowly and held up three fingers.

"Three options, you can stay here and probably never see your car again," he curled down one finger, the one with the signet ring that Steve was sure he'd *acquired* from that Irish guy who works at the dive bar on the outskirts of town, "or I'll tie you up and put you in the trunk where you can yell directions, because I've got *no idea* where I'm going." Billy smirked cheekily knowing it would get on Steve's nerves before he pulled his final fingers back into a fist and paused.

Steve looked at him skeptically and paused before asking, "What's the third?"

Billy grinned, all teeth. "I decided I liked the second option best so there was no point saying the third one."

"Asshole." Steve moaned, but in the way that you do when you're just trying to make it harder for yourself. You know the better option is to just go with it. Even in this case, when the options were limited and mostly terrible. Maybe a quick road trip with Billy wasn't the worst afterall.

Steve was good at tangling himself up in things. Nancy and Jonathan, the interdimensional demon stuff, *Billy*. And now this *dumb* shirt, this blue monstrosity that was the only clean thing he had in the house. He wrestled with the shirt over his head, his long limbs tangled like a stick insect caught in a spider's web. When he finally managed to pull the shirt down, it clung to his sticky chest like flypaper and rose up slightly higher above his waistband than he was comfortable with. Steve looked down at his strange pinstripe shorts and accidental crop top combo and winced. He'd rather just go shirtless but he knew Billy liked to blast the air con like he had a frozen body in the backseat.

He yanked hard at the hem of the shirt, trying to stretch it out, to some kind of avail. It didn't look the way it was supposed to look, a clean crisp line rather the hem sat stretched and wobbly like the way overworked dough sits in saggy ripples. And just as Steve stood pondering pizza toppings and why he hadn't done laundry in three weeks, a small brown haired boy with large brown eyes, not unlike

his own, appeared like a timid shadow and gave Steve a little fright. His heart jumped into his throat momentarily and then settled back to exactly where it belonged as he realised that it was Will.

“Jesus, Little Byers!” Steve breathed.

“Is Billy okay?” Will asked timidly, rolling his hands over one another.

“In theory.” Steve laughed at his own jibe.

Will looked at him with those big brown eyes. Steve and Will looked kind of alike in that way, but then all the boys in Hawkins kind of looked the same. Like there was something causing a genetic average in the water. This is where Billy stood out like a blonde haired blue eyed thumb, kicking the Hawkin’s male template in the balls. However unlike Steve, Will’s eyes were often large and wise like that of an owl. Will looked like he knew something Steve didn’t, a lot. Whereas Steve resembled something more of a bumbling tree frog, slipping from wet leaf to wet leaf until he hit something that resembled stability.

In this case, Will’s brown eyes looked so nervous that it was clear that the joke fell on deaf ears.

Steve smiled fondly and warmed his tone.

“I’m going to take him to that clinic outside of town for stitches.”

Will nodded, his mouth pulled into a straight line and his brow furrowed lightly in gentle concentration. "Do you know what that was about? With Tommy?" Will asked cautiously.

Steve shrugged. "No idea man, he's drunk."

Will nodded again, this time satisfied. "Tell Billy thank you for helping us."

"The most Tommy'd have done is talked garbage to you all night." Steve groaned. He still wasn't entirely sure what Billy was up to. To be honest, he wasn't sure what Billy was up to most of the time. Asides from a few things here and there, like that Billy was allergic to mushrooms and Steve had threatened to murder him with his mom's homemade mushroom risotto, Steve really didn't know all that much about Billy.

That first-sip-of-water level of satisfaction look dissipated from Will's face and was replaced by a much sterner look that reminded him that the Byers were a family as hardy as they were soft.

Steve sighed and rubbed his neck, maybe Will was right. "Yeah, I'll tell him thanks."

Will smiled again, eyes bright and fond like oil lanterns. "Billy has helped me a lot, he's really great when you get to know him."

Steve hoped that Will would find someone to talk about him the way he talked about Billy soon. It made Steve's heart ache.

“Yeah Little Byers, you're right.”

3. Chapter 3

Summary for the Chapter:

Billy and Steve start on their road trip to the emergency clinic

They'd been on plenty of car journeys together, but this time it was weird. Not weird because of the cut on Billy's forehead, this was normal for Billy, they'd shared plenty of moments in cars while Billy tended to some kind of injury, more than anyone could feasibly count. It wasn't weird because of the strangely intense conversation he'd had with Will before they left. That was too was something that actually happened quite a lot, not that Steve minded. For once in Steve's weird little life, it was the absence of *something* that made it feel odd, the absence of any reaction from Billy when he spoke to him about Will.

"Uh, don't freak out man," Steve said. He wasn't entirely sure how to broach the Will situation. Although slightly better than it was before, Billy's temper was like a poorly sealed nuclear reactor.

"I knew it," Billy gasped, surprised, and looked at Steve like he'd just seen a dog walk on its hind legs while robbing a bank with nothing but a rubber band and a handful of marbles.

"Knew what?" Steve grimaced, feeling a bit surprised at that response.

"Wheeler did cut your dick off, didn't she?!" Billy responded a little too loudly for Steve's comfort. He turned his head to Nancy who didn't seem to hear anything.

"This is serious!" Steve rolled his eyes and folded his arms over his white cast chest, the touch almost cementing his arm to his sunscreen sticky chest. Steve wanted to scream very loudly but sucked in a breath and tried to focus on the matter at hand. rather than his new lifelong hatred of sunscreen. "I think Will has a crush on you."

Billy's face was still as he quickly processed the information. "Yeah," he nodded slowly, "I know."

A lot things confused Steve, like, the majority of things, but Billy's reaction was up there with Quantum Physics and food packaging that was literally designed to be peeled off in one movement but just wouldn't.

"Is that it?" Steve questioned and winced when he pulled his arm away from his chest.

"Yeah." Billy shrugged. "I'm not gonna yell at a kid who probably doesn't even understand what he's feeling to fuck off, or whatever else you expect me to do." Billy sipped his beer. "I'm okay with it and he'll get over it as soon as he realises what a nightmare I am."

The shock on Steve's face now resembled the same bank robbing dog running for mayor and winning.

"Do you have a blood sample handy?" Steve asked, holding out an open, slightly sunscreeny palm.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Although Billy looked around the

sunbed quickly and instinctively as if to say, 'i'm sure there was one here somewhere.'

"I'm gonna do what Kurt Russell did in The Thing to check who's been replaced by an alien."

Billy glared at Steve like suddenly disemboweling someone seemed like a really fun way to spend an afternoon.

Steve looked at the cut on Billy's forehead. He had a lighter in his pocket and was pretty sure he could find some copper wire somewhere. He opened the glove box, just to check.

He'd forgotten that he'd had a copy of *No Jacket Required* stashed in inside. Like his bat, there were various copies stashed around his life, for emergencies. He looked at the cover, Phil Collins' orange face almost coming alive and daring him to play the tape. He held his breath and opened it carefully, using his thumb to lightly wiggle the case open. Empty, it was already in the stereo.

Steve smiled and edged his hand towards the radio, which at this point was playing some god awful country music. He jabbed the 'Tape' button so hard it could have broken his finger.

"Before you say anything, this is my car, that you insisted on driving, by the way." Steve didn't want to wait for Billy to push him out of the moving car. "And you said that Take Me Home wasn't totally awful."

Billy sighed, heavy, long and defeated, like a bouncy castle deflating after a children's birthday party.

"I guess I owe you for coming with me."

Steve was confused at that civil reaction and couldn't help think of the scene from *The Thing* again. He moved his hand away from the stereo incase Billy's chest opened up and bit it off. "You literally threatened to tie me up in the trunk. I didn't have much choice"

Billy shrugged nonchalantly, with no attempt at rebuttal. Steve wasn't sure if playing whatever he wanted on the stereo was worth this tectonic character shift from Billy. Steve, as much as he hated to admit it, liked Billy the way he was, at least for the most part.

Steve glanced over at Billy, whose open shirt billowed in the breeze. His hand was perched out of the open window, a lit cigarette between two fingers. Steve eyed Billy's shorts, that weren't all that much longer than the swim trunks he had on earlier, both the same vibrant red that stretched across Billy's heavy thighs. The shorts strained and flexed as Billy drove Steve's car.

When summer began, Billy had cut his hair. Steve couldn't imagine being the person brave enough for the task, but he thought Billy's hair looked better this way, it was still long but that god awful mullet had grown out. Steve liked to think that decision was prompted by his careful pleas of, 'I hate it, girls hate it.' He carried the victory around his neck like a gold medal won at an Olympic games specifically tailored to difficult social situations: hostage negotiations, tastefully telling a co-worker that their BO was getting out of control, and telling Billy to lose the fucking mullet.

Steve loved this time of day, the 'golden hour,' Jonathan had called it, where places became warm, beautiful versions of themselves and people even more so. As Steve carefully studied Billy, he wondered if the person who came up with that term was from California. He assumed that Californians, with golden hair and skin, glowed in the honey light. Or maybe that was just Billy.

Steve really wasn't one for comfortable silences, especially with Billy. They were friends, but for some reason a dull, uncomfortable pain swelled in his insides everytime he focused on the quiet around them and the firm line of Billy's lips. He thought it was because silence gave the opportunity for something to happen without warning or hesitation.

"You see, when Phil picked up after Peter Gabriel ruined Genesis with that whole Solsbury Hill situation, he took his music the way Genesis should..." Steve gulped after realising how dry his mouth was.

Billy finished his cigarette and flicked the butt out of the open window and interrupted, "Phil?"

"Yeah?"

Billy pivoted in his seat to look at Steve. "Who's Phil Collins, again?"

Steve shook his head and pointed at the tape deck. "We've been listening to him all day, keep up, Hargrove. Anyway, so Phil..."

Billy groaned and pinched the skin between his brows. "I swear to god, if you keep talking about *Phil* like he's your best friend or you want to suck his dick, I'm gonna launch *this car* into *that lake*. " He used his now free hand to point sternly to the large body of water in front of them.

"Firstly, I believe that if I got the chance, I would be great friends with Phil," Steve said proudly. "Secondly, why would I want to suck his dick? Have you seen him? Not him, *Jesus Christ* . I like the guy, but I don't wanna suck his dick."

Billy held back a smirk, clearly revelling in Steve's strange discomfort. "Okay Harrington, if you had to pick a guy?"

"But I don't want to suck anyone's dick," Steve interjected quickly.

"That's not the point, it's hypothetical." Billy pulled out another cigarette and placed it between his lips. He momentarily took both hands off the wheel to light it.

"Well I could say, *hypothetically*, whose body would you like to eat on a deserted island?" Steve retorted smugly, stretching his long legs into the well of the passenger seat.

Billy laughed. "Right now, *yours*, and it won't even need to be remotely an emergency if you don't answer the damn question," Billy growled, turning to Steve, the cigarette clinging to his lips.

Steve sighed, dejected and annoyed. First Will and now this. Steve was having an oddly gay day today. “ *That guy* from Wham, if I *had* to pick...”

Billy knew exactly which guy he was talking about and couldn't help feel a little flustered because he knew he bore more than a passing resemblance to him.

“Your turn,” Steve pressed, tweaking his eyebrows.

“I haven't thought about it the way you have, I don't have a specific guy in mind. Just, not him. I prefer brunettes,” Billy stated, keeping his eyes on the road.

“You asked me!” Steve whined, leaned forward in his seat and let his hands leap up in disbelief.

Billy shrugged and smirked at Steve's annoyance. “Anyway, good news, that Wham guy would definitely let you suck his dick.”

Steve nodded, a strangely satisfied look adorned his face. “Kinda figures. They're all like that in Europe, aren't they?”

“Like what?” Billy glanced at Steve, confused.

“A bit *queer*, ” Steve announced, although the final word kind of stung as it left his lips. Suddenly, Steve thought of Will. He needed to learn to be more open minded about this kind of stuff.

“I’m pretty sure they’re from the UK, not Ancient Greece.” Billy laughed, full and hearty, his eyes creasing at the corners.

Steve couldn’t help but watch the laughter spread across Billy’s face intensely and mirror his smile.

“I suppose everyone’s a bit queer, aren’t they, like, a little bit?” The words slipped out of Steve’s mouth like an ice cube falling out of the tray and slipping under the refrigerator and no amount of scrabbling would get the ice cube back. Even if somehow he managed it, it wouldn’t be the same.

“Like, I can appreciate when a guy is hot,” Steve added quickly. “Like, as a friend to you, you’re a decent looking guy, very decent looking.”

Billy scoffed and rolled his eyes. “That’s not being a bit, *queer* , that’s called having eyes, Harrington.”

“Don’t you think so too?” Steve asked, wanting some kind of ratification to his very clumsy attempt at being open minded.

Billy paused and gripped the steering wheel tightly. “Steve, if you don’t stop talking, I’m going to tie you up and drag you behind this

car.”

“It’s my car, you can’t do that.” Steve announced, still fully annoyed that Billy had somehow managed to worm his way into the driver’s seat.

Billy turned and glared at Steve with narrowed eyes. “I’m 30lb heavier than you and at least twice as smart. I can do whatever *the fuck* I want to you, Harrington.”

Steve could feel his eyebrows shoot up his forehead and he inhaled deeply to stop the word vomit pouring from his mouth. He wasn’t sure even the sharpest of inhales would keep his slightly tipsy lips at bay so he turned up the radio six notches.

The opening bars of ‘ *Don’t lose my number* ’ roared out of the stereo as a comically wide grin spread over Steve’s face and panic spread over Billy’s.

“*Billy!*” Steve rolled his lips together in order to fully accentuate the pop on the *B* as he sang. “*Billy don’t you lose my number!*”

“Nope, absolutely not.” Billy ejected the tape and held it firmly in his hand, almost crushing it with force. In an awkward squabble, Steve grabbed it out of his hand and thrust it back into the tape deck and held his palm tightly over the eject button so Billy couldn’t repeat his little trick. Steve began to sing the next lines loudly and extremely off key. It wasn’t that Steve couldn’t sing, Steve actually had quite a nice singing voice, but in this instance it was the worst noise Billy had ever heard and Billy had once ridden in the back of a police car with

the sirens going off.

“Fine,” Billy hissed and turned the volume wheel down to zero and with a crack pulled it the entire way off. It had taken much more force than he'd initially anticipated and the audible crack made him a little nervous that he'd done some permanent damage to Steve's car. He held the grey knob tightly in his palm.

“What the fuck? You can't do that!” Steve yelled, turning his entire body towards Billy.

“It was pretty easy actually.” Billy shrugged and rolled the knob between his fingers.

“No, you asshole there's a tweak in this car, if you take the volume knob off it can cause the car to short circuit.” Steve groaned, his brown eyes dark and serious against the backdrop of golden corn fields.

Billy turned to Steve and laughed. “That sounds dangerous and pretty pathetic.”

“Well I've managed to never rip off the volume knob before. So I think you're the dangerous one here, asshole.” Steve rubbed the bridge of his nose and groaned. “Just stop the car and restart it, that usually fixes it.”

Billy thrust his sneakered foot down on the break and the Beemer

came to a screeching halt. Billy braced himself against the steering wheel, his arms bulging with tension. Steve was too busy colliding with the dashboard to take much notice.

“Surely the Harrington fortune would be able to cover a car that doesn’t die at any mild inconvenience,” Billy sniped as he turned the key in the ignition. The turns became more feverious and panicked with each twist.

“Uh, It’s not turning on,” Billy mumbled whilst looking at Steve sheepishly.

“Try again,” Steve pressed, rubbing the aching spot where his chest collided with the dashboard.

Billy wiggled the key again and again. “Nothing”

“Fucking hell, move!” Steve leaned over and opened the driver’s door. The door swung open and Billy peered at Steve before Steve pushed him hard out of the open door. Once Billy was clear of the car, Steve pulled himself into the driver’s seat, his long legs and arms fitting perfectly into the absent space.

He turned the key with a few grumbles from the engine and himself, “Yeah, we’re fucked Hargrove. Thanks for that.”

Steve turned to Billy who had one hand propped on the open door.

“You’re really fucking good at ruining stuff aren’t you?” Steve scrambled out of the car and folded his arms with purpose. “First Tommy, now this”

“You’ve still not thanked me for Tommy.” Billy folded his arms too, flexing his forearms as he did so.

Steve laughed sarcastically and shook his head. “Thank you for what?! Almost splitting a guy’s skull in my backyard? Yeah two thumbs up, thanks, pal!” He gave Billy a strained thumbs up and rolled his eyes.

Suddenly, Billy’s voice was low and hesitant. He said, “You’d thank me if you knew what he was going to tell you.”

“Pretty sure I’d be fine about it. Remember, I’ve almost been eaten on multiple occasions. Plus, you almost killed me for no good reason, so I mean, you can’t do anything worse than that to me.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Billy snarled.

Steve shrugged and Billy took two paces forward and pressed this thick finger into the indent between Steve’s pecs. “Maybe I should have fucking killed you.”

Steve scoffed. “Add that to your long record.”

Billy took a step back, his brow threatening to arch in confusion.

“I’ve heard the rumours,” Steve spat, angry and malicious. There was so much malice in his voice he didn’t know what to do with it or where it came from. “I know that’s why you needed to move from Cali.”

“You don’t know shit about me, Harrington.” Billy spoke with the deep and slow rumble of a building hurricane.

“I’m glad, I don’t really want to get up in that fucked up head of yours,” Steve drew a breath between his teeth, “I’ve seen some fucked up shit, but that would be nothing in comparison.”

Suddenly a deep regret dawned on Steve. He wanted to pull the words back from his mouth on tiny little strings and swallow them down. He figured it would be better for him to choke on them rather than let them float away, polluting the air.

Steve held out his palms frantically. “Fuck I’m sorry,” he shook his head, “I don’t know why I said that.”

“You know exactly why you said that.” The slow rumble continued to build behind Billy’s voice.

“We’re friends, I’m sorry.” Steve’s large eyes grew like a hostage

begging for mercy.

Billy stared at Steve, long and hard. Steve relaxed slightly, knowing that whenever Billy chose to do something stupid, it was a knee jerk reaction. Billy knew better than to snap when he'd had a few seconds to mull the situation over. Steve waited, counting each breath as it came.

Suddenly, like a explosion of thunder, Billy swung his fist into Steve's face, colliding perfectly with his cheek. Steve, in classic Steve fashion, tumbled to the floor after failing to plant his feet.

Billy relaxed his shoulders and exhaled, like the power of a god had just flown through him. "Okay, we're even."

Steve groaned from the floor, which was still damp from the rain storm from the previous day.

Billy leaned over to give Steve a hand up, a gesture he was all too familiar with. "You need to stop running your mouth Harrington especially as you cannot fight for shit."

Steve clasped his hand around Billy's. "Yeah, okay, fair enough. I suppose I did deserve that."

They locked eyes for a brief moment. The honey air reminded Steve of the peach mornings they'd accidentally spent together in the graveyard. To this day, Steve had no idea why Billy was there. Billy

was right, Steve knew nothing about him. A tension built in his chest that urged him to pull Billy closer.

Steve held himself in limbo. “You did break my car though,” he said, before jerking Billy to the ground.

Billy collided with Steve’s chest and the slightly damp floor below him.

“Now we’re even.” Steve grinned as Billy scuffled from Steve’s person and quickly moved over to the car.

“I think we need to get a jump from someone.” Billy peered inside the car before shucking the muddy shirt from his shoulders and bundling it in his hand.

Steve hopped up from the ground and dusted himself off and strolled towards Billy. “There’s a motel about a mile away, there’s bound to be someone to help us there.”

Billy didn’t respond and continued to study the very bland but apparently now very interesting interior of Steve’s car.

“Unless you’d rather stay by the car?” Steve asked, moving next to Billy and peering into the back window.

Billy’s head snapped up and a grin spread across his face. “And have

people think I own a Beemer and listen to Phil Collins? Yeah, fuck that”

Steve nodded and pointed in the direction they needed to walk. Billy hurriedly followed.

“What did Tommy have to say about me then?” Steve asked, trying to contain his true level of interest on the matter.

“Doesn’t matter,” Billy mumbled.

Steve groaned like a sink emptying of water. “You were ready to kill him on my lawn. *Plus*, if it’s about me then I have a right to know.”

Billy sighed and grinned. Steve suddenly didn’t know what to expect.

Billy clasped a hand around Steve’s shoulder. “I’m gay and I have a huge crush on you Harrington and he was just *dying* to tell you.”

Annoyed, Steve shrugged Billy’s hand away and took two steps forward, distancing himself from the blond, just a little.

“It’s gonna be like that then, is it?”

Billy shrugged as if to say, *‘I’ve done nothing wrong.’*

Steve, dissatisfied and annoyed, chuckled. “Ah, fuck you Billy.”

Notes for the Chapter:

I hope you enjoyed! HMU on tumblr @demogrove

Author's Note:

Thankyou to my betas: Mulletgrove &
Eternalgoldfish- you rock

hmu on tumblr @demogrove